

# Air Looms

Louise Manifold

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SUE RAINSFORD

ARTS WRITER



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## A MIRACULOUS HEART & OTHER SPECULATIONS

One late afternoon in the summer of 1822, a violent storm moved through the Ligurian Sea and killed Mary Shelley's husband.

It's possible that Percy—only twenty nine years old but perpetually sickly and a weak swimmer—knew he was about to drown as soon as waves commenced rocking the boat. In any case, before he was lost to the water, he forced a copy of John Keats's poems into his pocket with a thrust that broke the new book's spine.

*Summer's joys are spoilt by use,  
And the enjoying of the Spring  
Fades as does its blossoming;  
Autumn's red-lipp'd fruitage too,  
Blushing through the mist and dew,  
Cloy with tasting: What do then?*

What do then?

What to do with the sodden poems that were still in his jacket when his body was recovered ten days later?

What to do with the body itself, already terribly decomposed?

What to do with his heart? His heart that wouldn't burn when his funeral pyre was set alight on the beach at Viareggio, and was eventually plucked from the embers by the poet Edward John Trelawny.

Though science would later suggest poor Percy's heart had likely calcified during an earlier bout of tuberculosis, when Trelawny relinquished the heart to Mary Shelley she was gifted a relic of seemingly miraculous durability.

In that moment, she was handed a distillation of her husband that she would wrap in silk and keep on her person until she, herself, died.

*Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.*

\*



Before she was a widow and the author of *Frankenstein*, eighteen year old Mary Wollstonecraft visited Pierre Jaquet-Droz's automata in Switzerland.

These automatised dolls—the draughtsman, the musician and the writer—each perform their function to such realist degree that the Church bemoaned their lack of a soul when they were first exhibited in 1774.

Flushed with Enlightenment-thinking, the 18th century imagination was primed for the possibility of life imparted through mechanics.

And more than life: pure, unpolluted reason.

When she visited the automata in Neuchâtel, what did Mary Wollstonecraft see?

Looking at the writer, did she see a small, artificial boy comprised of six thousand parts, each one miniaturised the better to fit inside his childish frame? Did she see the svelte mechanisms that allow him write any custom text up to forty letters long, ink his goose feather and shake his wrist to prevent heavy droplets from spoiling the page?

Did she know his bare feet signalled an openness to learning, and that each of his several choreographed errors is intended to remind us he is only a child?

Or, in that moment, did she see a boy moving too tenderly to be a machine?





A trio of automatised dolls made between 1768 and 1774.

A reanimated corpse written into existence in 1818.

A beloved's heart salvaged in 1822.

This sequence seems strangely regressive.

It forges an uneven arc toward an essential human quality that shrugs between sentience and sapience.

A brush with seemingly sentient technology, a lumbering creature of Promethean heritage and a petrified organ; it is an increasingly corporeal, even carnal portrait of how we move against the passions that drive us.

*To ruminate, and by such dreaming high  
Is nearest unto heaven...*

\*

Across history and fiction alike, technological innovation often takes human form. Often, too, these creatural forms speak to a collective desire for 'something that has the same utility as a person—that can do all the labor a person can do—but to whom we don't owe the same moral obligations.'<sup>(i)</sup>

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(i) Hari Kunzru, *Red Pill*, Scribner Books, 216



Clemente Susini's *Anatomical Venuses*, for instance, bolstered the brutality of the male, medical gaze between 1780 and 1782, and *Blade Runner*'s bioengineered replicants pursue violent ends for their creators in a dystopian twenty-first century.

The automata break with this pattern. If they strike today's viewer as uncanny, it's our contemporary gaze and its attending references that cast them in a disquieting light. No matter how we interpret their crisp motions and static faces: at the moment of their making they asked where reason might take root, what behaviours can be replicated and reconfigured, and if those same behaviours are the ones that make us human.

They pose questions, in short, whose answers might elevate our species.

This is what Louise Manifold draws on in *The Escape Wheel*, a collaborative film work made with singer Elizabeth Hilliard. Manifold visited with the automata for three years in the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Neuchâtel before scripting a libretto for Hilliard to sing in their close, private space. Again and again throughout the film, we Hilliard press past the point of breath. At the peak of such a sound, surely the voice itself will be lost? Irretrievable? Surely this is not a human voice, if it is capacious enough to repeatedly expire before once more flooding the darkened room?

And yet, Hilliard is very much human and very much intimately involved with these dolls who retain a cryptic, coyness.



We know they have a secret they will never part with, which is the magic of their interiors: only a handful of technicians are trained in their esoteric workings, and this perhaps accounts for the gothic atmosphere that extends into the physical space of the room—into the pianola draped with flexible neon. The dormant instrument shrouded with a ghostly glow seems an extrusion of the arcane energy of the film; here, too, are the facts of brute matter made strangely new. Here, too, is something equal parts solid object and ephemeral effect; something whose science we can break down into component parts but in the moment of encounter must simply believe in.

A trio of dolls with human knowledge behind their mechanical eyes.

A human voice in breach.

A bending source of light.

Manifold has made a space in which we might touch the edges of a moment unmarked by the dark consequences now often deemed the inevitable aftermath of any technological advancement. An artwork which responds in kind to these barefoot, clockwork dolls, and asks how we might yet move against the current they continue to set in motion.

*What do then?*

\*

In any case—what's in a heart?\*

An organ of almost universal symbolic resonance; locus of romantic love that pulses counter to logic and reason. A series of chambers that, once wounded, can only be healed by time's slow passage.

What about a heart so thoroughly coated with bacteria it cannot catch fire?  
A heart that, its host deceased, lived a second life pressed to the body of his widow?  
A woman who, when she wrote a book about a creature made of the deceased, didn't know she would years later look at a petrified heart in her cupped palms and say  
Here, *here* is my grief.

*So things remain; the drawing's caught - by mourning*  
*Quickened, you'd say: a second-brief creation -*

*What do then?*

What do now?

Open your mouth, tip back your throat. Let your chesty echo move around the room, because 'it's a merry thing, this heart of yours... It's like a drink in a small glass on the deck of a storm-tossed ship.' (ii)

And it's still inside you, after all this time.  
Years and years it's been going: voluminous and unrelenting.  
Sometimes it's a thud, at others a quiver—but it is always the sound your heart is making: relentless and ongoing. A series of moments in which nothing else is true.

Is it more comfort or terror, to know it might go on without you?

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\*List of quoted poems by John Keats:

"Fancy"

"Bright Star"

"The Human Seasons"

"Drawn in Death"

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[ii] The House In The Dark of the Woods, Laird Hunt, 71.





Photos by Paul McCarthy of  
*Air Looms*, Louise Manifold at The Dock

Sue Rainsford is an Irish Fiction and Arts Writer based in Dublin. Her practice is concerned with hybrid, lyric and embodied texts, explicit fusions of critical and corporeal inquiry, as well as with questions of transcription and otherness.

A graduate of Trinity College and IADT, in January 2017 she completed her MFA in Writing & Literature at Bennington College, Vermont. She is a recipient of the VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award (2016/17), the Arts Council Literature Bursary Award (2013, 2018, 2019, 2020) and a MacDowell Fellowship (2019). She is a visual arts writer in residence at Roscommon Arts Centre (2018-20), and was writer in residence at Maynooth University (2019-2020).

Her début novel, *Follow Me To Ground*, which received the Kate O'Brien Award and was long-listed for the Desmond Elliott Prize and the Republic of Consciousness Award, was originally published in Ireland by New Island Books, and was subsequently published in the UK by Doubleday Books (2019), and in the US with Scribner (2020). Her second novel, *Redder Days*, is available now with Doubleday

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